



George MacLeod's open-air preaching: Performance and counter-performance

Stuart Blythe

The Clydebank Press on Friday 15th August 1941 reported:

There was a nice little bit of diplomacy that Dr Geo. F. MacLeod, the renowned Scottish preacher, used addressing an open-air meeting in the burgh last Friday. Coaxing his hearers, mostly artisans in the yard, to come closer, he remarked that he did not believe in shouting like most open-air speakers, 'Not that I cannot do so,' he added with a smile, and in a much louder voice, 'but if I can get you all the nearer to me there is no necessity for it.'¹

Ron Ferguson writes MacLeod was 'a born actor and showman who enjoyed an audience'.² Such language is not always considered appropriate in the description of matters 'spiritual'. Yet, these qualities and attention to them contributed to MacLeod's performances as a 'renowned' preacher and communicator both in 'God's theatre' of a congregation gathered in worship and as a popular radio and television presenter.³ In turn in this article, I will abjure pejorative connotations and draw on performance theory to introduce and analyse George MacLeod's open-air preaching as performance and counter-performance.



MacLeod's open-air preaching

George MacLeod's ministry at Govan Old Parish Church between 1930 and 1938 included regular 'evangelistic' or 'missional' open-air preaching.⁴ Such open-air preaching also played a significant role in



key events, including the ‘Week of Friendship’ in October 1934, the climax to a two-year parish mission, and ‘Peace Week’ in 1937. Indeed MacLeod’s son Maxwell typified the Govan period of his father’s ministry by offering the image of the once soldier, now minister with dog collar, standing on a soapbox preaching in the rain.⁵ After Govan, when leader of the Iona Community and beyond, MacLeod continued to practice and promote open-air preaching. This included preaching at events associated with: a ‘United Witness’ which took place in Clydebanks in 1941 following the ‘blitz’; Glasgow street drama, carried out in the mid-1940s under the auspices of the Iona Community Youth Trust; the ‘Tell Scotland’ campaign in the mid-1950s; and, if it be allowed, the outdoor activities of the Scottish Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament from the late 1950s onwards.⁶

MacLeod’s motivations for engaging in missional open-air preaching were practical and theological. He described the situation he found on his arrival in Govan in 1930 saying, ‘The people of Govan weren’t coming to the Church. So we went out and began preaching in the street’.⁷ For MacLeod this was one way of responding to the missionary command of Christ in the tradition of biblical, historical, and Celtic missionaries.⁸ Furthermore, it was an activity that resonated with the centrality of the incarnation in his theological framework. In his book on preaching he writes:

[...] the essence of our Lord’s coming was to start with men where men dwell. Instead of visiting the earth in all the panoply of power He humbled Himself, was content to be born in a stable and to die on a Cross, if by any means He might save some.⁹

Such a doctrine when seen as exemplary requires preachers to go to people in the totality of their material and social existence. Open-air preaching follows this incarnational and sacrificial pattern of Christ not simply conceptually, but concretely. It places the preacher physically in the ‘market-place’ of people’s lives outwith the safety of Church conventions and boundaries.¹⁰

In terms of audiences gathered, MacLeod indicates that on occasions his weekday open-air preaching at Govan could attract

between 400 and 500 people.¹¹ During the ‘Week of Friendship’ in 1934, he claims the open-air preaching stances regularly gathered between 200 and 300 listeners, with 1500 on the last night.¹² The meetings during ‘Peace Week’ in 1937 are reported in *The Govan Press*, as ‘well attended each evening’.¹³ The open-air meetings in Clydebank, particularly mid-week, regularly attracted upwards of a hundred to several hundred listeners.¹⁴ Ferguson suggests a large audience for the street preaching that accompanied the street drama in the 1940s.¹⁵ T. Ralph Morton, however, indicates that such events were difficult to stage and that after the drama was over, it could be hard for the preacher to keep the audience.¹⁶ Events associated with SCND in the late 1950s and 1960s could gather crowds of several hundred to several thousand people. The nature of audiences varied according to context. Some were composed mainly of male workers gathered at shipyard gates. Other audiences according to specific location and occasion were more diverse. What is clear, however, is that on occasion MacLeod’s open-air preaching performances were able to command significant audiences.



Performance

In analysing MacLeod’s open-air preaching as performance it is necessary to recognise the particular historical context in which it took place. A survey of *The Govan Press* for the years 1930–38 demonstrates that during this period the streets of Govan were the stage for a large number of commercial, entertainment, political, social, and religious performances. Open-air activities, therefore, including open-air preaching by various religious groups, were a regular means of popular cultural expression and communication. MacLeod’s own declining participation in open-air preaching, relatively speaking, after he left Govan, can be related to the fact that he was no longer a local parish minister. It can also, however, be related to the changing and decreasing significance of public open-air events in popular culture. The specific historical context notwithstanding, there are several features of MacLeod’s open-air preaching that contributed to the particular nature and significance of his performances.

The first of these features was MacLeod’s preaching persona.

MacLeod preached in the open air as a Church of Scotland minister wearing his clerical collar. To this role he brought his personal, psychological, demographic, and physical features. He was a decorated former soldier, of aristocratic stock, posh accent, handsome features, and commanding presence. One SCND activist recalls in relation to MacLeod's open-air preaching:

He always came over as a sort of militant Christian, I always thought of him in terms of "Onward Christian Soldiers". So although he was a pacifist he wasn't a kind of quiet, quietly spoken sort of holding his line ... I just remember him as being quite up front and in your face ... not overbearing but purposeful.¹⁷

Following on from this, MacLeod was something of a Christian celebrity. At Govan he quickly established himself as a regular and popular radio preacher cultivating more widely his 'renowned' status as a preacher. This may help explain why his open-air preaching at the Church of Scotland Summer Mission campaign in 1936 attracted one of the largest crowds.¹⁸ By 1941 the notoriety of being founder of the Iona Community and of his being banned from radio due to his pacifist views were added to his reputation. Following the war his various reported activities and achievements, including becoming Moderator of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland in 1957, all contributed to his public persona.

The above discussion, however, does not do justice to the significance of MacLeod's particular persona in relation to the nature of his open-air preaching particularly as far as Govan is concerned. For in Govan, MacLeod the open-air preacher was known personally by many as one committed to local people and active on their behalf. One report as early as 1932 expressed it as follows:

[...] he will always be popular because of his sincere candour, and friendliness. Every day in growing numbers, his parishioners seek advice and guidance on matters which plex them and he is always at their service.¹⁹

Later, when MacLeod became the Moderator of the General Assembly, *The Govan Press* recalled: ‘Dr. MacLeod worked unceasingly during the “hungry thirties” to help the unemployed’.²⁰ MacLeod’s open-air preaching at Govan, therefore, took place within the context of the gospel performed in his own life and in turn in that of a church demonstrating the Christian ethic. The persona of MacLeod the open-air preacher was of a person standing up for ordinary people. Accordingly, Sir Alex Ferguson in his recollection of the MacLeod legend states:

It was amazing to have a minister standing on a soapbox at Govan Cross. Govan was a working class community, and everyone respected him because he was fighting for their ambitions and desires.²¹

In Govan, if not beyond, through reputation and action the persona of MacLeod the open-air preacher was related to the wider ethical performance of his life.

Following on from the above, a second feature of MacLeod’s open-air preaching performances, was his particular style of and skill at preaching. In terms of style, MacLeod preached on a large range of contemporary issues. This was to start where people ‘were at’.²² This was no mere homiletical foil in order to get to the real issue of personal salvation. Rather, it was an approach derived from his incarnational understanding of salvation and the gospel. It did, however, have homiletical significance. For it meant starting sympathetically with people’s real concerns in a way that could create solidarity of shared interest between preacher and people. Even when contesting with Communists at street corners his approach was to start with agreement and admiration.²³ At times, however, the common ground was not popularity or agreement, but relevance. Thus he was not afraid to deal with controversial but real issues. Consequently, in 1937 he preached pacifism at Govan Cross even as many of the formerly unemployed were now employed in rearmament programmes. MacLeod, therefore, started with real issues, and whether or not what he said was popular it was relevant to the lives of people. Morton argues it was in this way MacLeod spoke in the language of the people.²⁴

MacLeod's approach of starting on common ground with those to whom he was preaching was given particularly interesting expression during the 'Week of Friendship' in 1934, during which open-air preaching played an important part. For MacLeod the word 'Friendship' indicated the nature of the offer of God in Christ.²⁵ It also, however, indicated the attitude in which the 'mission' was carried out. MacLeod said that they proceeded on the basis that people were not 'lost souls but primarily unshepherded'.²⁶ This was not their fault but the church's fault. They were thus invited to 'return' to their own congregation if they had one, or that of the parish church if not.²⁷ On this whole approach MacLeod states, 'Such success as attended our witness was, we believe in no small sense due to this consistent attitude.'²⁸

If part of MacLeod's style was to start on the common ground of where people were, he also had preaching skills that were suited to the open air. He had a voice loud enough to be heard. He understood, however, as demonstrated at Clydebanks, that if you speak quieter, you can draw in a crowd and save your voice. This skill he attributed to advice given to him by Peter McIntyre, a Communist protagonist, after a street debate.²⁹ Control of tone, allowed him to come across as 'friendly, but authoritative and formal'.³⁰ To communicate, he could speak clearly and directly with logical argument. During 'Peace Week' he argued that the previous war had not delivered people's aspirations.³¹ He could also use image, metaphor, and parable. At Clydebanks he talked about the vertical and horizontal beams of the Cross being yanked apart in order to illustrate the dangers of separating the social and religious in public life.³²

MacLeod could also improvise in the open air, as message, style, and outdoor context coalesced in the event of preaching. The report of his open-air preaching at Govan Cross on the Monday night of 'Peace Week' illustrates this well. While he was preaching, war planes flew overhead. In response he commented that 'the whole Pacifist problem was that they could not be heard for the noise of armament making'. Then looking upwards towards a plane flying away he used the contrast between its green and red lights. He argued that people were happy to re-arm because they thought it was for defence, thus taking danger away, but that really it was bringing the danger towards

them.³³ This creative ability was important when dealing with heckling and questioning which were regular and often invited features of his performances.³⁴ In turn he was clearly capable, as the Clydebank report indicates, of using humour to communicate with and win over an audience. In addition, the strength of his ability with language enabled him, in keeping with the occasion, to capture popular sentiments in a slogan or phrase.³⁵ One such example was in the late 1950s. Speaking at an open-air SCND gathering, he rebuffed the economic promises associated with the locating of nuclear weapons on the Clyde with the phrase, 'You cannot spend a silver dollar when you are dead'.³⁶ This would then be turned by John Mack Smith and Morris Blythman into a popular protest song, "Ding Dong Dollar", with the line, 'O ye canny spend a dollar when ye're deid'.³⁷

A third feature of MacLeod's open-air preaching practice which contributed to its particular nature and significance was his practical and symbolic use of space. MacLeod had practical reasons for preaching in the streets. It was where he could reach people who were disconnected from the church. In the early 1930s the high unemployment figures meant that many people who were idle and had little else to do but hang about in the streets looking for interest or entertainment to pass the time.³⁸ On other occasions he chose other places where people could easily be found going about their daily business. In Govan, this included the streets overlooked by people's homes.³⁹ At Clydebank, it meant holding meetings outside of the shipyard gates at lunchtime. At Edinburgh University, it was the 'balustrades of the Quads'.⁴⁰

In addition to the practical use of space, MacLeod also understood the symbolic meaning of preaching in particular places. Govan Cross was the established centre of Govan. It was frequently used as a meeting place for all sorts of activities and events. It was also the ancient Christian centre of the area. MacLeod had a replica Celtic cross erected there in 1937.⁴¹ The next day, he launched his 'Peace Week' open-air campaign from that spot.⁴² To go to Clydebank and later to sites in Glasgow where there was bomb damage was to deliberately embody the presence of the church in places facing crises and distress. The locations chosen by MacLeod, therefore, were at times important not simply in their practical but also in their symbolic significance as he sought to gather an audience and gain a hearing.



Counter-performance

MacLeod's open-air preaching was a performance in which context, persona, style, skills, and specific location all played a part. MacLeod's open-air preaching, however, was also a counter-performance. It was an event in which and through which he contested other practices and ideologies contrary to his own understanding of the nature of the Christian gospel.

For MacLeod, open-air preaching was a counter-performance to what he perceived to be the failure of the Christian Church to engage in mission to the 'churchless millions' with the message of salvation.⁴³ People had to be warned about the danger of missing 'the wonderful promise of Christ – the promise of more Abundant Life: the promise of Everlasting Life'.⁴⁴ As he would later explain, the fact that the millions were churchless was not 'partly' but 'largely' the Church's fault.⁴⁵ Christendom was over. The Reformation construction had collapsed. Traditional revivals were unlikely.⁴⁶ The parish system was failing. Congregations were not concentrating on their local area.⁴⁷ In remedy to this situation MacLeod saw open-air preaching as a way of going physically to people in order to enter the material reality of their lives where the ideological contest for their allegiance was taking place. Accordingly, he was ready to engage in direct debate with Communists at Govan Cross. He was open to the risk of heckling. He was proactive in seeking questions in order to expose the Church and the gospel message to the actual concerns of people. Indeed, MacLeod attributed an encounter with a man called Archie Gray during a question time while street preaching and his valid critique of the Church as his motivation for founding the Iona Community.⁴⁸ While open-air preaching played an important part in MacLeod's own mission at Govan, I could find no evidence he considered it a requirement in every other situation to which he offered the Govan model as an example. Be this as it may, it played a central role in his ministry and mission at Govan. He also stated emphatically that open-air preaching should form part of the 'United Witness' at Clydebanks in 1941.⁴⁹ For through participating in such preaching, the churches could show themselves united by acting in unity. For MacLeod, therefore, engagement in open-air preaching was an expression of the Church

becoming the Church that it should be and a counter-performance to what he considered it had become.

MacLeod's open-air preaching was also a counter-performance to what he considered to be the dichotomy that had been created between the social and the religious, the material and the spiritual. He typified this dichotomy by describing the ideological options available to people on the streets as being represented by the spiritual 'curate' on the one hand and the socio-political 'Communist' on the other.⁵⁰ The emphasis of his open-air preaching approach was to challenge this very dichotomy. On the one hand, therefore, he challenged the ideas of Communism, not because he disagreed with the social change it wished to bring but because it denied the importance of the spiritual.⁵¹ On the other hand, he was as equally opposed to expressions of Christianity that separated the spiritual from the socio-political. Indeed, he attributed this separation to 'the direct act of the Devil'.⁵² For the Church not to address this, he argued, was to hand over 'this half-broken, half-hopeful, altogether distressed world to the Devil himself who stands waiting through the ages to annexe it'.⁵³ For MacLeod, therefore, this dichotomy was the primary power to be contested through 'speak[ing] the truth in love'.⁵⁴ Whether arguing with Communists or promoting pacifism, whether speaking at church-sponsored or politically-motivated events such as SCND, MacLeod's preaching was a counter-performance to what he considered to be this destructive and non-Christian separation between the socio-political and the spiritual. This is what is implicit in one SCND activist's comments about MacLeod's contribution to events when he says, 'he had a special Christian emphasis'.⁵⁵ In a context where neither open-air preaching nor political speeches were unfamiliar, MacLeod offered a counter-performance to the divorce created by the exclusive interests of each from his own understanding of the gospel.

A startling dramatic and theatrical example of MacLeod's open-air preaching as counter-performance is given by the open-air preaching that took place during the 'Week of Friendship' in October 1934.⁵⁶ This open-air preaching took place at different stances in the afternoons and evenings of the week, located within a MacLeod-orchestrated drama. This drama variously involved the use of procession through the streets, robed choirs, the ringing of church bells amplified through

loud speakers, and the carrying and use of deliberately chosen religious symbols including a banner with a Cross on it, a Bible, and the ringing of the town crier's bell. On the final night those who proceeded singing through the streets stopped at various corners to pray. MacLeod describes events at the final preaching stance as follows:

[...] in narrow, overcrowded Hamilton Street, from window and in street, some 1500 people must have listened patiently to an appeal that every Christian soul should return to their own place of worship on the Lord's Day coming and renew their old allegiance, while any Christian who knew no Fellowship should join us in their Parish Church.⁵⁷

Through these events with open-air preaching at their heart, MacLeod the 'showman symbolist' counter-performed the absence of the Church's active presence in the community. On the one hand, he offered alternative words and symbols to those offered by other political and religious street performers who had their own banners and parades. On the other hand, through an oral/visual incarnational proclamatory event he promulgated his own understanding of the Church of Scotland at mission in its local community.



Conclusion

George MacLeod's open-air preaching took place in contexts where outdoor activities were a regular and recognised means of public expression and communication. Yet, MacLeod brought to this preaching his own particular qualities, skills, style, and gospel content that established his open-air preaching not only as a performance but as a counter-performance to other competing practices and ideologies. In such can be seen to lie the particular significance and nature of his open-air preaching activities.

Notes

- 1 “Clydeside Cameos”, *Clydebank Press*, 15th August 1941, 3.
- 2 Ron Ferguson, *George MacLeod: Founder of the Iona Community* (2nd ed.; Glasgow: Wild Goose, 2001), 245.
- 3 *Ibid.*, 245–49, 307.
- 4 MacLeod preached outdoors on many occasions. In this article I am focussing on those examples where the preaching was designed to reach audiences beyond those who would gather in buildings for worship.
- 5 Maxwell MacLeod, “Father’s Day”, *Coracle* (Spring 1990), 14.
- 6 Hereafter, SCND. My own definition of preaching which is ‘the oral presentation of biblically-informed Christian convictions, with the purpose of effecting some sort of change’ would include MacLeod’s ‘speaking’ at such events as preaching.
- 7 My transcript from MacLeod speaking in the film *Alf Goes to Work* (National Council of Churches, USA, 1960).
- 8 Untitled address given by MacLeod to City Business Club, probably from 1941, explaining the Clydebank mission [n.d.], National Library of Scotland, *MacLeod Archive*, acc9084/124.
- 9 George F. MacLeod, *Speaking the Truth – In Love: The Modern Preacher’s Task* (London: SCM, 1936), 56 f. In this book MacLeod relates some of what he is writing specifically to open-air preaching [65 f.].
- 10 The ‘market-place’ was a favourite MacLeod phrase to describe the material realities of people’s lives among which he considered the Church had to place itself, see George F. MacLeod, *We Shall Re-build: The Work of the Iona Community on Mainland and on Island* (Glasgow: Iona Community, 1944).
- 11 *Scottish Field*, July 1959, 27.
- 12 MacLeod, “The Message of Friendship”, *Govan Old Parish Magazine* (November 1934), [unnumbered].
- 13 “Peace Week in Govan: Open-Air Meetings Well Attended”, *Govan Press*, 12th November 1937, 5.
- 14 MacLeod, “Memo on Clydebank as at Oct. 1941”, [unnumbered], acc9084/180; “The Position in Clydebank” [unnumbered], acc9084/180.

- 15 Ferguson, *George MacLeod*, 244.
- 16 T. Ralph Morton, *Evangelism in Scotland* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1954), 50.
- 17 From SCND activist's interview with author, 31/1/09.
- 18 James F. Simpson, "The Church in the Open", *Life and Work* (October 1936), 388.
- 19 "Random Jottings", *Govan Press*, 25th March 1932, 4.
- 20 "The New Moderator", *Govan Press*, 24th May 1957, 1.
- 21 Ferguson, *George MacLeod*, 145 f.
- 22 MacLeod, *Speaking the Truth*, 57.
- 23 Ibid., 65 f.
- 24 T. Ralph Morton, *The Iona Community: Personal Impressions of the Early Years* (Edinburgh: Saint Andrew Press, 1977), 13.
- 25 MacLeod, *We Shall Re-build*, 107.
- 26 George F. MacLeod, *Are Not the Churchless Million Partly the Church's Fault?* (Edinburgh: Morrison and Gibb, 1936), 17.
- 27 Ibid., 23.
- 28 Ibid., 17 f.
- 29 *Scottish Field*, July 1959, 27.
- 30 From SCND activist's e-mail correspondence with author, 2/1/09.
- 31 "Peace Pledge Union Meetings", *Glasgow Herald*, 9th November 1937, 4.
- 32 "Rev. Dr. MacLeod Talks to Shipyard Workers", *Clydebank Press*, 15th August 1941, 3.
- 33 "Peace Week in Govan", 5.
- 34 "Round about Govan", *Govan Press*, 12th November 1937, 5.
- 35 From SCND activist's e-mail correspondence with author, 31/1/09.
- 36 From SCND activist's interview with author, 31/1/09.
- 37 *Ding Dong Dollar: Anti-Polaris Songs* (Glasgow: Glasgow Song Guild, 1961–62), 2.
- 38 Ferguson, *George MacLeod*, 150 f.
- 39 MacLeod, *We Shall Re-build*, 23.
- 40 Stuart L. Harris, "The Apostolic Preaching – To-Day", *Coracle* (June 1941), 19.
- 41 "The Cross of Govan", *Govan Old Parish Magazine* (October, 1937), [unnumbered].
- 42 "Peace Week in Govan", 5.

- 43 MacLeod, *Are Not the Churchless Million*, 11–15.
- 44 Statements from “The Card Left in Each House in Week Prior to Mission” [in Govan in 1934], MacLeod, *Are Not the Churchless Million*, Appendix [unnumbered].
- 45 MacLeod, *Are Not the Churchless Million*, 24.
- 46 MacLeod, *We Shall Re-build*, 7–9, 94–96.
- 47 MacLeod, *Are Not the Churchless Million*, 7–15; *We Shall Re-build*, 99–104.
- 48 Ferguson, *George MacLeod*, 150 f.
- 49 MacLeod, “Proposed Co-operation” [unnumbered], acc9084/180.
- 50 Ferguson, *George MacLeod*, 151.
- 51 MacLeod, *Speaking the Truth*, 65 f.
- 52 Ibid., 52.
- 53 Ibid., 55.
- 54 Ibid., 64.
- 55 From SCND activist’s e-mail correspondence with author, 2/1/09.
- 56 A description of these events is given in MacLeod, *Are Not the Churchless Million*, 22 f. Other information is available from local church and newspaper sources.
- 57 MacLeod, “The Message of Friendship”, [unnumbered].